

Delmarva Bayside Marshes Important Bird Area

Fact Sheet

Location: Accomack County

Total Size: 9,174 ha (22,660 acres)

Elevation: 0-3.2 m (0-10.5 feet)

Site Description: The lower Delmarva Peninsula rises in elevation from south to north such that extensive marshes have formed along the bayside north of the Accomack-Northampton County border. These marshes are the best examples of high-marsh habitat in Virginia. The system includes high-marsh habitat, low-marsh habitat, an extensive network of sandy berms, and scattered pine hummocks. Marshes are bordered along the mainland by some of the most extensive maritime forests in Virginia. Although there is considerable agency and NGO ownership within this area, much of the habitat remains in private ownership. Much of the habitat is remote due to the limited number of access points from land and the shallow depth of surrounding waters.

Bayside marshes



Protection: Although a considerable portion of this system is owned outright or under easement to government agencies and NGOs, much of it remains under private ownership. Saxis Wildlife Management Area is the largest agency-owned marsh complex within the system and is managed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Mark's and Jack's Island Natural Area Preserve is under the ownership and management of the Nature Conservancy while Parkers Marsh Natural Area Preserve is owned by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Scattered holdings are also controlled by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation.

Birds: Because access into this system is limited and difficult the avifauna is not well documented. Until recently, the system was known to support the entire suite of sensitive high-marsh species including Black Rail, Northern Harrier, Henslow's Sparrow, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Sedge Wren. The known population of Henslow's Sparrow has been lost in recent years likely due to degradation of habitat by common reed. The area supports what may be the last remaining breeding population of Black Rails and the largest population of Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows in Virginia. The sizes of these breeding populations have not been assessed. Marshes also support a significant breeding population of Seaside Sparrows. The fringing berms along extensive marshes support a significant but poorly documented population of American Oystercatcher. Small marsh islands support populations of American Black Duck, Forster's Terns, and Common Terns. The system likely supports a significant population of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the winter months. Very little is known about the use of this system by shorebirds and marsh birds during the migration periods.

Conservation and Threats: Primary threats to bird populations within this system include 1) loss of habitat to the invasion by common reed, 2) loss of habitat to sea-level rise, and 3) increases in mammal populations and associated predation. The aggressive invasive plant common reed is spreading rapidly throughout this system from a substantial source population that has formed at Saxis Wildlife Management Area. This species invades along the marsh-upland ecotone and eliminates habitat required by the Henslow's Sparrow. This is likely the primary cause of the loss of this species from this habitat along the Atlantic Coast. Habitat continues to be at risk in the long term to rising sea levels. The increase in mammal predators (raccoon and both fox species) over the past 30 years on the Delmarva mainland has almost certainly had a detrimental effect on reproductive rates of marsh-bird populations. To date, this area has received very little attention from the conservation community.